

TT West 2016 – Sweet 16

There's driving gold in them thar hills! We're talking about the Black Hills of Wyoming and South Dakota which hosted the feature drives of this sixteenth edition of TT West. This year was the first that TT West was an ACNA sanctioned event. The new association with ACNA was responsible for TT West 2016 being a sell out in 6 weeks which gave us our largest attendance in recent years at 17 cars.

Audi TTs as far east as Indiana arrived at our starting point of Laramie, Wyoming for our initial drive on Monday October 3. We saw only one significant incident as the attendees arrived. One Mk 1 TT was hit in the grill by a flying piece of wood, destroying the grill and damaging other parts. Fortunately the damage was not extensive enough to preclude participation. That TT's toothless grin was a topic of discussion wherever we traveled. Historically, car issues are rare at TT West. In 2002 a TT hit a deer on the way to the start in Las Vegas. Another year, a TT lost its recently replaced transaxle (a non-Audi part) the first day of the drive, and two years ago a recently replaced CV boot failed (again a non-Audi part. There is a message here.)

Our string of TTs with every color of the rainbow garnered extensive looks by the locals wherever we went. We even had local police give us the thumbs up as we drove through some towns. In one town however, they trailed us to ensure we followed the rules of the road.

The 240 mile first day's drive began with the most challenging road of the day, Route 130 west of Laramie that goes over the mountains of the Medicine Bow National Forest with road elevations approaching 11,000 feet, adjacent mountain tops over 12,000 feet, and a good supply of curves. We started out in bright sun but ran into a blizzard as we climbed into the mountains. Driving in several inches of snow was a TT West first. Those cars with summer tires had a challenge but, thankfully, the snow stopped as we descended out of the mountains. We spent the evening in Casper, Wyoming which began as a pioneer trail ferry site across the Platte River but became a boom town during oil discoveries circa 1900.

On Tuesday we had better weather although we saw a few light snow flurries at the higher elevations. Driving was spirited during this 215 mile trip. We traversed Wyoming's Thunder Basin National Grassland and finished in the Black Hills at Deadwood South Dakota. Antelope were frequent spectators to our caravan as we sped along. The transition from grassland to tall pine forests of the Black Hills was incredibly abrupt, taking only a few miles to be in an alpine environment for the remainder of the week. Deadwood was a notorious lawless town that sprung up during the discovery of gold in in Black Hills in the 1870s. Wild Bill Hickock was murdered there while playing poker in a saloon, and it is also the final resting place of wild west celebrity Calamity Jane. The attendees enjoyed strolling around the historic Old Town area.

The weather continued to improve on Wednesday which was mostly sunny with temps in the low 50s. The 170 mile circle route through the northwest portion of the Black Hills had some challenging twisty-turnies. The highlight of the drive was the first of several major landmarks to

be visited this week - Devils Tower National Monument. The monument's popularity skyrocketed after it had a central role in the movie "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" but we saw no extra-terrestrials. The site is sacred to dozens of Native American tribes who are petitioning to get the site's name changed as they feel the present name is offensive.

Thursday was another fun day at TT West. This 120 mile drive had two key attractions. The first was a visit and tour of the Crazy Horse Memorial and the second was an exploration of Wind Cave. On our way to our hotel in Custer (another Black Hills gold rush town) we went through Custer State Park which was teeming with wildlife easily viewed along the side of the road, including elk, antelope, deer, donkeys, and buffalo.

We saved the best for last. Friday we attacked two of the most difficult roads in South Dakota. The first is Route 16A, the Iron Mountain Road - 17 miles having over 300 curves, 14 switchbacks and 3 corkscrew turns. For the corkscrews, you drive over or under a bridge of that same road, that is, it is a 270 degree continuous corkscrew curve that includes a bridge and changes elevation by about 25'. The second road challenge was route 87, the Needles Highway, that is only slightly less demanding. Both roads are narrow with several one lane tunnels and bridges but incredibly scenic. Sandwiched between these two roads was a stop at Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Friday's weather was the best of the event - mostly sunny with temps in the low 60s.

Saturday had an optional drive to the Badlands National Park that was taken by about half of the attendees. This wild and rugged area was a fitting end to this year's event.